

Alternative Cinema Conference times seven: *Jump Cut* editors' individual perspectives

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 21, Nov. 1979, pp. 37-40

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— Peter Biskind

I think the conference was more of a success than anyone anticipated, certainly more than I anticipated. As a member of the Organizing Committee, I was acutely aware of our numerous mistakes and the widespread, occasionally harsh criticism they generated. Thus I approached the conference with considerable trepidation, and was both surprised and pleased that it worked out as well as it did.

From my point of view, the major problem once the conference got underway, and one that was laid at the feet of the OC, was that the substantial amount of time that had to be devoted to caucusing and consciousness raising made it impossible for those people involved to participate fully in conference activities. That prevented the conference as a whole from dealing with important analytic/strategic questions having to do with the overall left perspective for the 80s and the role of the left film community within this perspective.

While it is true that these questions were not dealt with, my feeling is that given the state of the left film community, the balkanization of the conference into caucuses was unavoidable. It was not strictly a function of the way the conference was organized or scheduled, nor of the questionable politics of the organizers, although they were probably a contributing factor. Moreover, I think the caucusing and consciousness raising around gay and lesbian issues was important, both to the participants and everyone else.

If the regional organizations endure and prosper, the task now as I see it is to deepen the mutual appreciation of different needs and perspectives that was provisionally achieved at the conference, and build upon that appreciation a coalition that can overcome its middle class base and create a truly socialist practice.

— Michelle Citron

This statement was very difficult to write. I discovered that what I learned cannot be put simply into words. A lot of it is too personal and not what I want to say in JUMP CUT. A lot of it is still too confusing, not sorted out yet in any way that can be articulated. So what I'm left with seems awfully insipid. How do you describe an emotional process? For that was really what the conference was about for me.

Statement: Having only been to "academic" conferences before, I was quite unprepared for the Alternative Cinema Conference. Superficially it was similar: workshops I felt obligated to attend only to find boring, and plenary sessions I felt completely alienated from. Restlessness. Boredom. But simultaneously there was another conference going on, humming with importance and life. It took two days for it to emerge, coalesce, but when it did. It was the first time in the eight years I've been making films that I truly felt myself to be a filmmaker. It was being taken seriously as a filmmaker in a public place, being seen as a filmmaker in the midst of other filmmakers, being seen as a filmmaker by people whom I had never met before, people who were not my friends. It was being with women who were both feminists and filmmakers, making me realize how alienated and isolated I always feel having to constantly choose between one group or the other, always ignoring at least half of my identity. It was the acknowledgment of both the personal and political. The personal as political. It was a feeling of wholeness and healthiness and it was exhilarating. And when this real conference (of the third world, gays, lesbians, and feminists) finally emerged and confronted the official conference, there was a demonstration of education, struggle, process, transformation, and change. Within me, for others at the conference, between us all. And that was powerful.

— Chuck Kleinhans

Having worked on JUMP CUT for five years with the aim of helping build a strong radical film movement as part of a larger revolutionary social and political movement in the U.S., I couldn't help but be excited by the fact of so many people getting together at Bard. As a left institution and activity, JUMP CUT has tried to make connections, as our editorials and publicity flyers have continually emphasized, between film and video makers, viewers, exhibitors, distributors, users and critics. We've constantly stressed the interrelation of theory and practice

and tried to build "a nonsectarian Marxist cultural and aesthetic theory and criticism that recognizes the political and social critiques of people struggling for liberation: workers, women, blacks and third world people, gay men and lesbians." At the conference this was happening "in person" instead of "in print." It was, and remains, an immensely energizing experience.

One of the best things for me was seeing films and tapes by members of the Third World caucus. I resolved to learn more about militant black, asian, chicano, native american, Puerto Rican and other hispanic filmmaking and to present and discuss this vital work in JUMP CUT.

One disappointing thing to me was the absence of film and video people using personal, experimental and avant-garde forms. Some people working in this area came to the meeting, particularly women, but didn't bring their work, intimidated by the "heavy" reputation of the left in film circles. I was encouraged when several critics, particularly Barbara Martineau, Amos Vogel, Julia Lesage, Joan Braderman, and the feminist caucus statement argued for an expanded definition of "political" film. Another disappointment was the absence of people doing theoretical work and academic film studies who claim to be radical. It was good to see those publications that were present: the left news publications *In These Times*, *Seven Days*, and the *Guardian*, and the magazines *Heresies*, *Cineaste* and JUMP CUT. Other perspectives were noticeably missing. Their absence hints at a certain elitism on the part of those publications, writers and experimental filmmakers, as if they had nothing to learn from other cultural activists. It may well be evidence of the distance of their work from face-to-face politics and from the left in general. Perhaps it comes from a fear of being held accountable for their ideas, for their style of expression, for their politics. They have much to learn, and important analyses to contribute, if they can break away from their ivory tower aloofness.

Finally, as beneficiary (however unwillingly) of the privileges of being white, male, straight, educated, and employed in a job I love, it was a special joy to get together with the one slighted, if not oppressed, group to which I do belong: Super 8 filmmakers. The Super 8 workshop was a turn on. It was great to hear of other people's work, swap advice, and make plans for a newsletter to continue the contact.

— Julia Lesage

As a member of the Alternative Cinema Conference advisory board, I had doubts that the conference structure would meet the needs of women participants. Consequently, I repeatedly contacted the organizing committee to suggest ways that the conference structure could better serve the needs and reflect the concerns of women media activists. At Bard, at the first caucus meeting, over 100 women met and

expressed the kinds of problems they were facing at the event. Although many of the women at Bard were active in left politics and confident about discussing their media work within mixed-sex political groups, there were an even greater number of women there who were just beginning to make films or do video, or who had done media projects primarily within the independent women's movement. This latter group had a different sense of what was "political" than the OC did.

Since the beginning of the U.S. women's movement, a demand has been placed on the whole left to expand its definition of "political." The assertion that "the personal is political" means more than "emotions are important." Feminists have begun to articulate the structures and process of daily life in a political way. In fact, a new type of women's video and filmmaking and of feminist criticism has emerged in the last decade which is closely related to the women's movement and is one of the dominant tendencies in U.S. "alternative media." Women film and video makers are often documenting personal concerns, domestic work, and individual women's lives. Yet many of the women at the conference, particularly the less "established" video and filmmakers without commercial distribution or full-time media jobs, told me that they did not feel free to bring their films or tapes because their work, often about women's lives, seemed just too "personal" or lacking in "analysis" to fit within the framework of the conference.

Furthermore, the women at the feminist caucus seemed to agree on the ways that a conference style could be sexist. Many were put off by the debating atmosphere of large plenary sessions and would have preferred to work in the context of personalized small-group discussion and noncompetitive skill-sharing. In large sessions of over 100 people and in rooms where people have to come up to microphones to speak, not many people from the audience speak anyway, but fewer women spoke than men. Because panelists and workshop leaders were chosen from among those who'd "made it" — even on the small scale of left media work — panels and workshops also did not often reflect the analysis or concerns of many of the women there. The women attending the conference were less likely to be part of ongoing media collectives, to have political films in distribution (except small-scale self-distribution), or to have sophisticated technical and organizational skills to teach to others there — and these seemed to be the main criteria for selecting the people who shaped the conference program. A different approach, suggested by the socialist feminist caucus, would have been to structure workshops around explicit political issues, particularly sexism and racism, and apply analyses of these issues to the participants' film/video work. As it was, the events were organized around the work of people who were "successful" in one way or another, thus diminishing the formal participation especially of Third World people, women, lesbians and gays (clearly not all mutually exclusive groups). The caucuses were forced to do so much work because the conference structure had put

them and their political concerns in a marginal position. And ironically it is the political struggles of these particular groups that forms much of the "movement" on the left today.

The women in the feminist caucus didn't necessarily have political unity among themselves. Some who were offended by the conference's sexism do their work primarily in mixed political organizations — ranging from Third world, community based, or anti-imperialist media work, to progressive projects within establishment media jobs. Some defined themselves specifically as feminists, some as lesbian and/or socialist feminists. Many wanted to have the conference address issues of labor, class, race, and imperialism from a woman's perspective. In fact, one of the issues that the conference never really dealt with was of particular concern to many of the women there — that is, how to deal with the political and aesthetic "incompleteness" of many progressive films. Within a non-competitive and supportive structure, women need to have their work seen and discussed politically so as to develop forms of political criticism — particularly around issues of race and class. Similarly, there is a need to evaluate feminist aesthetic strategies, especially as these are related to the potential audience for one's work and the analysis a film/video maker is trying to convey.

It hurt the women in a material way for them to have to spend so much time caucusing. As many women said to me, in one form or another,

"We haven't had a women's movement going on for this long and developed our own noncompetitive forms of working together for us to have to start again at zero at a conference like this."

Speaking from my own experience at the conference, it is very difficult for me as a woman to work constructively with radical men who have heard the whole feminist rap many times before and who have done very little personally to change. And there were too many of these men there, too many of these as organizers and speakers. As a teacher, I am willing to struggle with students who have never before been challenged about their sexist and racist behavior and ideas. As a left media activist, I cannot struggle around the most basic issues of sexual politics every time I join a group. There is too much other work feminists have to do.

— Ruby Rich

At the opening plenary of the conference, Lillian Jimenez made a series of wonderful, clear and inspiring statements that stood throughout the events of the week as a kind of signpost. She began by insisting that Puerto Ricans could make films, and were most capable of making the films about their own community; that blacks could produce media, and should be the ones shaping their own images. However, I remember her continuing, racism was not an issue that would ever be exorcised in

discussion or worked through on paper — issues of race must be struggled through in work. For that reason, as a past member of Third World Newsreel, she insisted on the need for multi-race, multi-class and mixed-sex crews in order to effect skills-sharing, an authentic relationship to the subject community, and a group process grouped in concrete race, class and sex issues.

Her statements made me think, and as the conference progressed through the week, I thought more and more, we feminists were all fenced off in separate caucuses, a function of our separate legitimate struggles, but also an effect of the conference racism that forced the expenditure of negative energy and turned dialogue into strategy. I learned a lot about strategy in that week. But finally, too, I learned about positive energy, when I participated in the writing of a Socialist Feminist statement with women from the Third World and Feminist caucuses. I experienced the truth of Lillian's insight. We struggled over the accessibility of our language, the grammatical tricks of "we" (spoken to include all women but too often exclusionary in its perspective), the touchy issue of racism within feminist circles. We wove a base of unity out of our acknowledgment of difference and disagreement.

The conference events have made me extraordinarily, and permanently, sensitive to racism. I notice the homogenous skin color of film conferences. I see how white and how class-bound many feminist films are, and worse, to what an extent the issues they identify are accepted unquestioningly as "universal" issues. We engage in a subtle version of cultural imperialism every time the absence of Third World sisters and working-class women is ignored. It is the responsibility of white women to fight racism inside the feminist community, just as it is the responsibility of heterosexual women to fight homophobia there. Not out of guilt, but out of a realization of the present loss. How we impoverish ourselves.

I have begun to rethink basic assumptions. "Woman's community" for whom? Are working-class women comfortable in a women-only vegetarian restaurant? How many books in Spanish does the women's bookstore carry? Is lesbian separatism a viable choice for Third World lesbians; and if not, is it an inadvertently racist position? How many films shown in film classes contain the image of a black woman or communicate her experience? And of those, how many made by black women? How many films subtitle their Spanish dialogue into English, but not their English dialogue into Spanish?

All these questions have been spinning in my head and in my conversations since that week in the country in June. I don't yet know all the answers. But I believe the conference struggle has put me on the right track. I want to continue the dialogue begun there among black, white, Puerto Rican, Chicana and Cuban women. I am searching out the

films and writings, and am recommending them to all women I know who teach or program film. We all know we live in a society that is racist and class-divided. We have to fight, constantly, against replicating its ugly pattern in our own lives and structures.

— Peter Steven

I participated in the Canada/Québec caucus, which agreed that it was necessary to make a statement to the conference emphasizing three points.

One, the great frustration that so few people from Canada and Québec had been invited (20) and that the selection process had apparently been so haphazard. It was recalled that a similar conference had been held in Montreal in 1974, which was international in scope and which included many people present at this conference. In light of the fact that the U.S. film industry considers Canada as part of its domestic market, a U.S. film conference should have been more sympathetic to the issues of cultural imperialism practiced both by the industry and the U.S. left.

Two, partly because of the conference selection process, it was pointed out that the Canadians and Québécois attending were not by any means representative of the diversity of political filmmaking activity.

Particularly evident to Québécois and Canadians was the lack of any participation from Native people (both north and south of the border). Were any Native people in the U.S. invited? The absence of Native peoples from a left conference in North America is surely a major problem.

Three, strong emphasis was to be placed on the fact that the political situations and filmmaking activities are radically different in Canada and Québec. The cultural, linguistic, and political contexts in Québec must not be confused with the very different priorities in English Canada. These differences must be understood. We must accept Québec's right to self-determination.

— Thomas Waugh

Despite the undoubtedly sincere efforts of the organizing committee to accommodate lesbian and gay input, the Alternative Cinema Conference got underway with most of us in the Gay Men's Caucus feeling invisible and overwhelmed. Those of us gay men who sought refuge the first evening perched on a comfortable rail outside the crowded Bard coffee shop knew what one filmmaker meant when he said he hadn't seen so many straights together in one place since high school.

What was worse was that our struggle seemed relegated once again to a kind of second priority. We didn't want to have to convince the conference of anything about our cause, or to have to compete for

audiences for our screenings, or to have to legitimize our struggle in terms of other more "respectable" ones. But the competitiveness seemed built into the conference organization: I projected TRUXX, an important Montreal film showing gay resistance against the police, for only a half-dozen people at 1 a.m. the second night — at the same time as screenings elsewhere of feminist, minority, and sixties films, as well as new films and video programs.

As a result of all this, there was tension: between lesbians and many other women, between the Third World groups and the gays, even between the Toronto observers and the Montreal observers ... We felt frustrated as gay white men, for example, unable to speak for Third World lesbians and gays who were not openly represented at the conference.

All the same, things began to brighten after a few days' momentum had built up within the lesbians' and gay men's caucuses. We began to feel our strength and a sense of our common needs. Once the two caucuses began to meet jointly, the exhilaration of covering fresh territory grew. We began to map out how we could work together, and get down to business about how we could share information, resources and funding. One thing we did was set up a central information pool for lesbian and gay media workers by which we will be able to keep in touch with and make use of each other's progress. (I will be happy to forward to the pool any information about gay media resources that is sent to me care of JUMP CUT and to add the names of interested people to our contact list.)

It was much harder work, though no less exhilarating, going about the short-term job of relating constructively to the conference at large. The culminating point of this process was the Friday afternoon plenary devoted to the lesbian and gay struggle. There, one by one, we stepped to the microphone and described various strategic aspects of our personal and collective experiences — losing our children, coping with fear on the streets, emerging from the closet on the job, confronting homophobia on the left, etc. We finished by presenting a list of demands.

It seems that the value for us of naming our struggle in this way was matched by the plenary's educative function in terms of the straight (and closeted) delegates. Many of us were amazed to hear straights tell us afterwards that they were realizing for the first time the political implications of police harassment, of custody litigation, of coming out, of street violence, of Stonewall and now of San Francisco. Exhausted, we faced the recognition that it still takes a lot of our vital energy to just inform the straight left of the most obvious elements of our oppression and to prod its conscience even on this tenth anniversary of Stonewall.

Of our demands to the plenary, potentially the most far-reaching called

for mediamakers to include "responsible" gay images in their films and to implement "the principles of affirmative action" in all phases of production, and for alternative distributors to "seek out, distribute, and encourage the production of media made by lesbians and gay men."

Another demand was more controversial (perhaps because it involved specific action rather than laudable sentiments): It called for the repudiation and exclusion from future conferences of groups with explicitly homophobic platforms. A spokesperson for one such group abandoned an attempt to defend its platform in the face of the overwhelming consensus in support of this and the rest of our demands.

This consensus was encouraging but no one had any delusions. Catharsis and unity don't necessarily get films distributed. A few skeptics professed not to be worried about being crushed in the stampede by delegates to implement the resolutions just approved. Nevertheless, our spirits were high, and we felt that important gains had been made. Most important, in my opinion, is that the urgent strategy of reaching out from our separate movements to make our presence felt in the straight left as a whole has been tested and validated.

The final stretch of the conference saw a much higher profile of lesbians and gays in the various workshops and plenaries. It was an important step to be able to see *WORD IS OUT* screened on the same program with *BLACKS BRITANNICA* and *PUERTO RICO: PARADISE INVADED*. I myself joined the panel on Film Criticism and Theory along with another last minute addition from the Black caucus. In all modesty, I feel that an important broadening of the terms of the discussion resulted. This is despite my disappointment that all of the post-panel discussion from the floor was addressed to the five white straight panelists. (It may not be the last time that we find that the kind of successful guilt-tripping which was undoubtedly present in the previous day's unanimity does not automatically lead to dialogue.)

But for the time being, most of us left the conference with a clear sense of what is to be done, a lingering high from the glut of good films, and above all the elation coming from encountering, many of us for the first time, a strong loving community brought together by the same history, interests and goals.